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March 23, 2025

Scripture: Isaiah 41: 8-10

Sermon Title: Slow to Fear: An Invitation to Courage

Prayer...

Introduction:

In our Lenten Sermon Series focusing on the book An Invitation to Slow, we are ready to look at chapter 3, which is entitled Slow to Fear: An invitation to Courage.

I like the way this chapter starts. Mark and Lisa begin by telling us the story of the porters, who would greet strangers that came to Benedictine monasteries back in the 5th century. They quote Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun who reflects on the Rule of St. Benedict, which was a guide on how to lead a monastery. Chittister quotes from the Rule of St. Benedict's description of a porter.

“At the door of the monastery, place a sensible person who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose wisdom keeps them from roaming about. The porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find someone there to answer them. As soon as anyone knocks or a

poor person calls out, the porter will reply, ‘Thanks be to God’ or ‘Your blessing, please,’ then with all gentleness that comes from reverence of God, provide a prompt answer with the warmth of love.”

So that is a reflection by Joan Chittister, but I want to add that I often visit Benedictine monasteries and we have one close by in Mount Angel (The Mount Angel Abbey). When I spent four days at Mount Angel Abbey this summer as part of my sabbatical, I was greeted with great hospitality. I would say that the brothers and nuns I have met at monasteries live to welcome the stranger. It is part of their rule of life.

Mark and Lisa McMinn move from reflecting on hospitality to remember that part of the role of welcome is to comfort those who are experiencing fear. They remind us that many refugees come to new countries living with fear of how they might be welcomed or not.

I recently heard Frank Soh, the Executive Director of EMO, which stands for Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, speak at our local Cascades Presbytery meeting. He shared how one of EMO’s ministries, SOAR provides legalization services like citizenship classes for immigrants. Frank highlighted that both

the Cascades Presbytery and EMO are working together to care for immigrants, including those who are refugees and asylum seekers.

As we talk about the reality of fear, today, let us remember the role of the church in helping to comfort those immigrants who are afraid and to provide support and solidarity with them.

Our Scripture today is an invitation to hear God's comfort for those who are afraid. Isaiah 41 vs. 10 is God's word to the people of Israel.

Yahweh says through the Prophet Isaiah,

“do not fear, for I am with you;

do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you; I will help you;

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

These are powerful words of comfort. The reality is that like the Israelites before us, all of us in this room have roots that go back to immigrants. Most, if not all of us, at one time in our ancestry came to this land as strangers seeking welcome. We came in fear and needed to know that God would comfort us by offering the words, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

What is your experience of fear? I think all of us have experienced fear at some level, some more than others. Lisa and Mark remind us that fear can lead to anxiety quite easily in our society.

They use the example of social media. With social media, we find ourselves consuming a ton of information from Facebook, Instagram, and other sites often on a daily basis. As we learn about all the challenges in our world, we naturally begin to feel distress. At this point, we as human beings seek social connection. Therefore, we return to social media to find support for our concerns, which leads us to also learning about more fearful things, so rather than decreasing our anxiety, we increase our anxiety and frankly get more fearful, distressed, and depressed.

According to the McMinn's research shows that real life friends are able to provide social support, but social media typically does not. Yes, sometimes Facebook and Instagram can build connections that are meaningful, like seeing photos of family members or friends that help you feel more connected to our lives, but often social media increases our anxiety because we get a lot of information without our control that tends to increase our anxiety.

The invitation from God from the prophet Isaiah is to hear the word of comfort. We can bring our fears before God and hear God say, I am with you. At a deep level you do not need to fear. I think God often wants to say to us, step back from your computer screen and phone and go out in nature. Breathe in some hopefully clean air and gaze for a moment at a flower, the sky, maybe the eyes of a child, and just relax. Hear the encouraging word that we need not live in fear, but we can put our hope in God.

From this place of greater peace, then we enter the world with courage. Lisa and Mark McMinn, suggest that in our humanness with all the feelings we experience, we are invited to trust in God and walk with courage. Sometimes we will walk with wobbly knees but we can do our best to display courage with God's help.

They tell the story of David and Carol Sherwood, who some of you know through Friendsview. David died of Leukemia and during his final year of life, he and Carol approached his illness with honesty and courage. Mark McMinn talked to David about living and dying not long after his diagnosis with Leukemia. This is what David said about his experience.

“Stuff happens, and you deal with it. And there is a Christian faith behind this, but not the kind that says, ‘Oh, God’s going to fix this.’ Bad things happen to good people. So in dealing with this news, it’s a blow, but not so much a fear of death, per se, but the reminder of the preciousness of people.”

David did face his declining health and his ultimate death with courage, but he also was able to be open about his grief and he founds ways to treasure the gift of family and friends. Carol Sherwood supported David and her friends and family in many ways during David’s illness. She posted updates through Caring Bridge that also highlighted her honest journey.

For example, Carol wrote.

“Life is wonderful but it can also be raw and painful. I think we are called to see it in its fullness. To share ourselves with others in our fullness. To not deny others the benefit of being able to benefit from our struggles. To keep working on being as fully human as we can be.”

Powerful words from a powerful couple, providing us with helpful insights as we all journey through life, death, and resurrection.

The McMinn’s conclude this chapter reflecting on how love is a pathway to courage. They quote from their Quaker Friends tradition the following thought.

“Courage is a fundamental act of faith...As we continue letting go of our fears and following the motions of love, we are led into a new, more abundant and joy-filled life. Although this life is not always free of pain, it is graced with a courage that will endure any adversity.”

In talking about love as a motion or way of living in the world, a final reflection in this chapter, reminds us of the life and wisdom of Julian of Norwich, and English anchoress who lived in Norwich England. Julian of Norwich had amazing visions of love revealed in Jesus and his suffering. One of the great statements attributed to Julian are the words, “all manner of things shall be well.”

How do you feel about those words? I imagine one might have a bit of resistance and attraction to these words. Our resistance might be due to the fact that our world is full of struggle and sometimes it might feel like the future is bleak. Our attraction is that it is very comforting to believe that in spite of the pain in the world, God will ultimately make all manner of things well.

I personally wonder that part of what we need in our world today is a positive view to the future. Clearly we need to be honest about the pain in the world.

Clearly we need to acknowledge the fears that people live with on a day to day

basis. And yet, we also are invited to have courage and to bring our fears before God and dare to hear God say, “Do not be afraid for I am with you and all manner of things will ultimately be well.

My daughters Cate and my wife Karen visited Norwich England a couple of years ago and we saw the church where Julian lived as an anchoress. When we walked into the church, we could feel God’s presence and the prayers spoken in the church through the centuries. We also ran into a beautiful cat outside the church, which was kind of funny since Julian was known to love and own cats. It was a special time being in the place where Julian met with God and spoke wisdom to people through a window that opened up to a world in need. Julian’s life was not easy. She lived during a time of plagues and violence and yet she had these visions of love that compelled her to live with peace and a slowness to fear. She lived with courage.

Friends as we continue to journey through Lent together, may we be slow to fear. May we be invited into a life of courage where we put our trust in God and where we join God in showing solidarity with and care for those that feel afraid. May we dare to trust that all manner of things will be well and may this optimistic view toward the view give us hope and we live out our faith in Christ.

In the Name of Jesus We Pray, AMEN.

Isaiah 41:8-10

8 But you, Israel, my servant,

Jacob, whom I have chosen,

the offspring of Abraham, my friend;

9 you whom I took from the ends of the earth

and called from its farthest corners,

saying to you, “You are my servant;

I have chosen you and not cast you off”;

10 do not fear, for I am with you;

do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you; I will help you;

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.